

Writing Essay Examinations

BEFORE THE EXAMINATION

- Gather as much information about the format and content of the examination as possible. If your instructor is willing to share the information, ask how many questions there will be, how long the answers are expected to be, and how much time will be allotted for the exam.
- If you have already taken an exam in the same course, analyze the questions from the previous exam. What kinds of questions does this instructor typically ask? Does each question have one part or multiple parts? Familiarize yourself with your instructor's examination style.
- Imagine what questions will be on the exam. For example, if the class lecture emphasized "the definition of X and the three parts of X," a question on the exam will likely be, "Define X and describe its three parts." Make a list of these possible questions and plan how you would answer them.

BEGINNING THE EXAMINATION

- Budget your time. Allot time to outline, write, and proofread. For example, if you are given 75 minutes to answer 5 questions, you might budget 15 minutes to read the exam and outline your answers, 10 minutes to write each answer, and 10 minutes to proofread your exam. It might be helpful to write this budget at the top of your exam and cross off each time increment as it passes.
- As you read each question, determine what you are being asked to do. Are you being asked to define, explain, argue, illustrate, or summarize? Know what these words mean.
- Watch for multiple-part questions. For example, this question has only one question mark, but multiple questions: "What is X? Define X and its three major characteristics. Be sure to mention what traits X does not possess, and why." This question really has six parts: 1) the definition, 2-4) each of the three characteristics, 5) the traits it does not have, and 6) the reasoning behind it. Be sure to answer each part of a multiple-part question.
- For each question, before answering, jot down a brief outline or list of points to cover. The time spent doing so will save you time when you begin writing and allow you to finish the exam on time.

WRITING THE EXAMINATION

- Do not recopy the question unless asked. Instead, label each answer with the number of the question.
- Turn the question into a statement. For example, if the question is "Why do scholars object to X and Y?" begin your answer, "Scholars object to X and Y because of A and B." Then, expand on that statement.
- Be as concrete and specific as possible. Give examples. Include specific facts, dates, names, and references to your readings and lectures.
- Leave space between your answers. If you are reading your exam and discover that you forgot to answer part of a question, you will need room to add information.

PROOFREADING YOUR EXAMINATION

- Double-check to be sure that you have answered all parts of each question.

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- Read slowly to check for spelling, clarity, and completeness.

Writing Short Answer Responses

Before you write:

- As you read each question, determine what you are being asked to do. Are you being asked to define, explain, argue, illustrate, or summarize? Know what these words mean.
- Keep an eye out for multiple-part questions. Answer each part of a multiple-part question.

As you write:

- Use strong paragraph structure: Topic sentence, development, conclusion sentence
- A good topic sentence answers the question of the prompt and clearly states the main idea of the paragraph.
- Develop your answer fully. Instead of listing your answers briefly, develop each of your supporting ideas in 1-2 sentences. Write in your own words rather than repeating exactly from the text or lecture.
- End your paragraph with a conclusion sentence that ties back to the main idea of the paragraph and brings it to a satisfying close.

Sample Short Answer Question: What is the scientific method?

The scientific method is the way that scientists try to work out answers to questions they have about nature and the world. First a scientist should observe what he or she wants to study. Next, the scientist forms a hypothesis about that subject. A hypothesis is possible explanation that has not been proven. The scientist then uses the hypothesis to help predict what else might be found out. Finally, the hypothesis is tested by the scientist through experiments to see if it is true. If the experiments support the hypothesis, it might eventually become an accepted theory. If not, the scientist will have to change the hypothesis or start over. By following these steps of the scientific method, scientists learn more about our world.